ONCE BOUGHT, ALWAYS BOUGHT.

SHORT STORIES

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON (OF PEARSON'S WEEKLY)

No. 307.] FOR WEEK ENDING NOVEMBER 17, 1894. [PRICE ONE PENNY.

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AND

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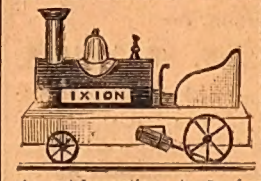

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PEARSON'S EXTRA CHRISTMAS NUMBER.—Now on Sale.

SHORT STORIES.

EDITED BY C. ARTHUR PEARSON.

No. 307.] FOR THE WEEK ENDING NOVEMBER 17, 1894. [PRICE ONE PENNY.

RAW-BONED HEROISM

"IT isn't until you try to light your pipe with your last match that you realise what is meant by 'the four winds of heaven,'" said John Wray.

He was lying flat on his chest as he said this, and his words were addressed to a very lean-bodied specimen of the genus lizard, that stood on its tail a few feet from him, blinking at him out of its round dull eyes. In Mr. Wray's mouth was a short black pipe, and in his fingers a wax vesta, very dirty and very limp; that he had fished up, a minute since, from the depth of his breeches' pocket.

It was to escape the wind that Mr. Wray lay on his chest, and to gain the shelter of two large sandstone boulders that stood together and formed a little natural cavern.

S-s-s-s-cratch! Whiz-z-z! Bang!

The lean lizard fled away in mad affright. The match ignited, flickered for one brief instant, and then went out. John Wray threw away its scorched stump in mute disgust, put his "cutty" back in his pocket, mounted his horse, and rode on.

"Another defeated project!" he exclaimed, when he had gone a hundred yards. "To think that I have been to the trouble of filling my pipe, dismounting my horse, tying the brute up and scratching my hand on some infernal thorns in the bush I tied him to, and all for nothing! Heigho!"

He shaded his eyes with his hand and looked anxiously ahead.

"No sign of human habitation yet," he muttered.

The path he followed was rugged and uneven, and based its claim to be called a path on the fact that two months previously, in the rainy season, a heavy waggon had passed over its course and left the impression of its broad wheels on the miry ground; which impression had since been indelibly stamped in the hard soil by the heat of the sun. On either side of the path stretched a seemingly limitless plain, diversified at wide intervals by a tiny hillock of ironstones or a clump of milk-bushes.

The horizon was dimmed and blurred by a light mist, having in it shades of green and pink, that betokened the speedy fall of night. The heavens were cloudless, and the red sun, looking like the palm of a blood-dyed hand, was throwing up long streaks of crimson and gold to mingle with the pale blue of the sky.

Soon it would be dark, densely dark, till the sun rose, and in this interval of darkness John Wray reached Sin Point.

Sin Point is a little mining station, consisting of some thirty log houses and the inevitable drinking booth. A mile from its confines John Wray passed a solitary traveller, who rode an exhausted pony. This traveller peered curiously into John Wray's face as that gentleman clattered noisily past him on the hard track, but gave him no salutation, and made no attempt to follow him closely.

Standing on the outskirts of Sin Point, some fifty yards from the other houses, was a single one-storey tenement. At the entrance to this isolated dwelling John Wray reined in his horse, and, dismounting, rapped noisily with the heavy handle of his riding-whip on the wooden panels of the door. A woman, dressed in an ill-fitting gown and wearing on her head a hideous sun-bonnet, answered his summons.

"Who is it?" she cried, shading her eyes with her hand and peering into the darkness. "If it's you, Hank, your trousers ar'n't done yet."

"It's not Hank," said John Wray.

The woman started, and laid her hand on the door-post for support.

"John!" she cried.

"Yes, John," was the reply. "John Wray, your erring husband, come back like the prodigal son to partake of the fatted veal, or anything else that is appetising and forthcoming. Is there any place where I can put up this poor, tired brute?"

"Come with me," the woman said, and took the horse's bridle in her hand and led the way to a little shed in the rear of the building. "You can put him there," she said, pointing to the interior of this shed. "There's corn in the corner, and two buckets of water. He can have those."

John Wray unbridled his steed, washed out its mouth, placed before it the heap of corn, and then turned and faced the woman.

"And now you can get my supper ready," he said.

"Yes, John," said Hannah.

He followed her back to the room from which she had emerged to admit him, and sat down on a chair beside the blazing log-fire.

"Bustle, Hannah!" he said.

"Yes, John," said Hannah.

She stood a little behind him, with one hand resting on her bosom; and though she said "Yes, John," very meekly, made no attempt to obey him.

"Come, bustle!" repeated John impatiently. "I'm hungry, and dog-tired into the bargain. Don't stand there looking at me!"

Still Hannah hesitated.

"You have been away four years," she said simply.

"Is it as long as that?" he remarked as he kicked the fire

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The woman laid her hand on the doorpost for support.

with his heavy boot and scattered a shower of sparks upon the hearth. "It doesn't seem as many months."

"To me it has been a lifetime," she said. "John, have you no kind word for me? Believe me, I bear no ill-will towards you."

"I never met the woman who could bear ill-will towards me—for longer than five minutes at any rate," said John Wray, passing his white fingers through his long black hair, and half unconsciously arranging a phantom necktie. "Come, Hannah, you're not pretty enough to indulge in heroics. An ugly woman talking sentiment is an abomination. I can't stand raw-boned heroism. That's agreed."

"May I kiss you, John?" his wife said humbly.

"When I've had my dinner you may," he replied. "'Pleasure first, duty afterwards,' has always been my motto."

Hannah sighed, and said no more. Soon a hot repast was on the table, and John began to eat.

"Don't talk to me whilst I'm eating," he said, when Hannah ventured a timid remark. "If I answer you with my mouth full, my words will get mixed up with my food, and I shall have to swallow them. No man likes to eat his words, you know."

At last his appetite was appeased.

"Now you may kiss me," he said, as he drew his pipe from his pocket.

His wife availed herself of this gracious permission, and then sat down on the buffalo rug at his feet and looked at him whilst he smoked.

"Well, and what have you been doing in my absence, sweet wife?" he asked.

"My life has been smooth and uneventful," she said. "The miners have been very good to me. I wash and mend their clothes, and they in return provide me with food and give me money, and do anything for me that I am unable to do for myself. That is all. What have you been doing?"

"Many things that I shall not tell you of; many things that would interest you; some that would not, and some that would merely pain you. I shall only tell you of these last things."

"Thank you, John," said Hannah, with a touch of fine sarcasm that was involuntary.

"Look at me, my dutiful wife!" said John, melodramatically. "Am I not handsome? Am I not clever? Am I not your master and you my slave? There are some men who go to the dickens on horseback. I am one of such men, and I have killed many steeds of the devil's providing in my time.

"First steed, my uncle's fortune, which I ran through in two years. Second steed, my father's fortune—I rode that to death in fifteen months. Then I walked for a bit. I walked past your house. I walked into a coal shaft and broke my arm. You found me lying there—doubtless my immobility was picturesque—and walked into your heart. I was taken to your home and tended. My broken arm became complicated by a malignant fever. You nursed me through my illness into convalescence, and then your father borrowed my fever, and it took him to heaven. He left you his fortune. I married you, and mounted my third steed. It has lasted me three years.

"My fourth steed was a sorry hack—an appointment at three hundred a year, in some Government hole, which a lordly relative of mine placed at my disposal. In a month it was on its knees; but ere it fell I mounted, by its aid, a better horse. Unfortunately this better horse led me into the wilds of the Criminal Code, and I came a nasty cropper over a forgery hurdle.

"I fled from England, taking you with me in my flight because I couldn't get rid of you. We came here, and soon I mounted my sixth steed—a nice little filly which the miners here christened "A Streak of Luck."

"On this filly I rode away, four years ago, and betook myself to Cape Town, where I have been going to the dickens at a rare pace. Two months ago my horse fell badly, and I was thrown. I left Cape Town and journeyed north to see if I could get a 'pony' or two from you—excuse the pun if you see it! On my way hither I mounted my seventh steed. It's only a poor flesh-and-blood horse that I stole from the man I have been travelling with. You have seen it, for it's in your stable now. If its owner catches me, I shall mount my eighth steed—the end of a rope—and that will take me home!"

He rose, knocked the ashes from his pipe, and laughed gaily.

"How much money have the miners given you in these four years?" he asked.

"I don't know. About a hundred pounds, I think."

"Only four ponies! Well, I suppose I must put up with them."

"But you cannot stay here," said Hannah. "The miners have sworn an oath that if you ever return they will lynch you. You stole Hank Davison's best horse when you went away, and—and—besides——"

She hesitated.

"And besides," he concluded, "these men are filled with honest indignation because I deserted you. Don't worry yourself, my sweet wife, I don't want to stay. Where's your money?"

"If you will only take me away with you you shall have it all—every penny," said Hannah. Then she came and laid her face on her husband's knee and clasped his hands in hers, and cried:

"May I kiss you, John?"

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"Oh, John, dear John! do, *do* take me with you. I will go as your servant, as your slave. I have been so lonely without you all these years. Take me to your heart again. I believe you loved me once. You sneer. I know that I am ugly and stupid, and you are so beautiful and clever. But, oh, John! if only for the sake of that tiny second life you gave me—if only for the sake of our dead child!—take me back to your heart; try to love me! I will be dutiful as I have always been.

"And, John, I know you will be angry with me for saying it, but you don't know—you don't know!—try to think sometimes that there is a God! Let me lead your thoughts upward to Him! Let me——"

"Hush!" cried John, suddenly rising with a blanched face, and shaking off her clinging hands. "What's that?"

Hannah listened in silence. Faintly audible to her ears was the sound of many horses and the confused hum of a babel of angry voices. The sounds drew nearer—nearer—nearer!

"It's the miners!" cried Hannah. "They know you are here! Quick—quick, John! Run—hide! My God! My God! how can I save him?"

. . . . . .

An hour after John Wray passed him on the road, Bob Radd, the traveller who rode an exhausted pony, entered Peter Bittle's bar, and dropped in the midst of the miners congregated there a metaphorical bomb. The explosion was four words dramatically uttered, and the four words were these:

"Jack Wray's come back!"

At first the miners were speechless with astonishment. They then crowded round their informant, and rained on him a perfect deluge of hot inquiries. As it was impossible to answer all of these, Bob Radd answered none, but called for a glass of whiskey, and waited till the storm of questions had in some measure subsided.

"'Ow do I know?" he cried, when comparative silence was restored. "'Ow do I know? Didn't I see 'im wi' my own eyes not a mile from 'ere? Warn't 'e a ridin' as fine a blood stallion as any on yer 'ere ever clapt eyes on? An' didn't I, to make sure on 'im, peep through Tant Wray's winder as I come up 'ere, an' see 'im awolfin' down 'is dinner, while 'is poor desarted wife stood by 'im awatchin' 'im as if he was a gord? Ain't I seen it all wi' my own eyes? 'Ow do I know, indeed! I reckon I ought to know, anyway?"

Hank Davison stood out from his fellows and held up a large, impressive hand.

"Mates," he said, "yer remember what we said four years agone? Yer reckerlect yer oath?"

"We do!" they made answer, waving their hands.

"An' yer still o' the same mind?"

"We air!"

"Is it the end of a rope?"

"It is!"

"Then come along, Git yer 'osses out. The cuss 'as got a good mount from all accounts, an' 'e may try ter give us the slip."

The miners gave a whoop of savage delight, and scattered. Soon they reassembled, mounted everyone, and went their way towards Hannah Wray's cabin at a rapid trot.

The full African moon had risen, and was flooding the countryside with its silver radiance. By its light all stood out clearly and distinctly—the sprawling milk-bushes, the tiny hillocks, the shallow pools that the fierce sun had yet left, and the little log habitations of the miners, with their covering of white plaster.

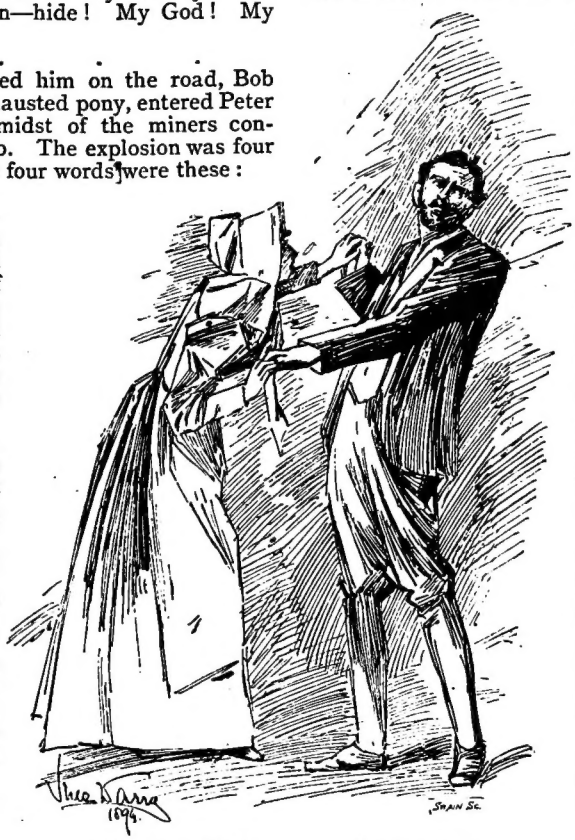
Swiftly the cavalcade moved along towards Hannah Wray's abode; but ere they reached it they saw a huge white horse dash out from the shadow of its farther side, and speed away across the moonlit plain.

"That's 'im!" screamed Bob. "That's 'is dandy black coat! Them's 'is fine ridin' boots! That's 'is long black 'air! That's 'is 'orse'. That's 'im. After 'im, mates; don't let the Gord-forsaken galoot git off this time!"

"We kin all spare the skunk, so don't spare 'im, any on yer," yelled Hank Davison with grim, paradoxical humour.

"Shoot 'im, if yer git near enough, as yer'd shoot a sprawlin' jackle!"

No need had Hank's companions for any such adjuration. Each was thirsting for the blood of the fugitive, and soon Sin Point was left in the darkness behind them—deserted, forsaken. Over the loose, sandy soil that clung to the horses' hoofs and fell in heavy showers about them, over the dried-up beds of erstwhile swollen sloots; through clinging, thorn-clad bushes that tore the skins of the horses and riders till the soil was stained with their dripping blood; slipping, falling, stumbling, jostling, leaping, flying, cursing, hallooing, the band of rude avengers bore down on their hapless quarry. But he was better mounted than they, and had his horse been fresh would soon have left them far behind.



"Hush!" cried John. . . . "What's that?"

As it was, he held his lead easily. A mile was swiftly covered—two, three—till Sin Point was a couple of leagues behind, and still the stern chase continued. But now the rough, heavy horses of the miners began to lose pace. One by one they fell out of the race till only Hank Davison was left of the whole party, and even his steed gave signs of weariness.

"'*E shan't* escape!" cried Hank savagely, and he drove his heels into the horses ribs, and strove to urge it to greater speed.

But even as the words were uttered his jaded steed stumbled and fell heavily, and Hank was pitched forward on his hands and knees. In an instant, however, he was on his feet again. Swiftly he brought the rifle that hung across his back round to his shoulder and fired at the fugitive.

"Missed! by all that's unlucky—missed!" he cried, for the flying figure on ahead still held its course unmoved.

Then, suddenly, Hank saw it reel heavily and fall to the ground.

"Hooroar!" he shouted, turning and beckoning wildly to his comrades far behind. "I've hit 'm! We've dropped our bird at last!"

An answering cheer came faintly on the night air to his ears. With a run Hank approached that huddled heap upon the ground, which the riderless horse, now lost in the darkness, had left, and sunk on his knees beside it.

It lay face downward in the loose sand. As Hank stooped to turn it over a flying cloud obscured the moon, and all was dark. A horror, that was all the more horrible by reason of its indefiniteness, filled the miner's soul. He buried his face in his hands and prayed for a gleam of light. It came at last, touching reverently the dead form, and Hank discovered that he held in his arms the lifeless form of her who had once been the living, loving woman—Hannah Wray.

. . . . . .

John Wray mounted his eighth horse on the first anniversary of his wife's death; and, as he had predicted, his eighth horse took him home.

The Extra Christmas Number of *Pearson's Weekly* will be published on Thursday, November 15th, and will consist of 32 pages. Price Threepence.

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THE ROMANCE OF A RING.

"A LADY, Major."

The constable bowed slightly, as with a gesture he intimated to the caller, who had waited for nearly half an hour in the ante-room, that she was at liberty to enter the inner office.

The District Superintendent of Police, standing upon the threshold where he had dismissed his last visitor, looked attentively at the heavily veiled figure which moved toward him. Placing a chair for her beside his desk, he seated himself at his official post and waited for her to speak.

Without any hesitation she threw aside her veil, glancing round the office, as if particularly curious as to her surroundings. She was a woman of about thirty years of age, whose face, though wearing an expression of the profoundest melancholy, was remarkably lovely and interesting.

"I have come to you for advice," she said, looking questioningly at the Superintendent.

He was a thin, wiry little man, who, with the tips of his forefingers pressed closely together, was regarding her keenly through his half-shut eyes.

"I shall be most happy to give it, madam."

The lady smiled slightly—it was plain to see that she smiled seldom—at a suggestion in his tone.

"Perhaps your advice is oftener asked than taken?" she said. "That is no unusual occurrence anywhere, and may I say frankly that it is quite probable I may not act upon yours."

The Superintendent bowed impressively, a twinkle in his keen, half-shut eyes.

"A diamond ring," she began, "has been stolen from my writing-desk, and under peculiar circumstances. The drawer in which it was placed was intended for a jewel-casket, and even its existence was known only to myself. I put the ring into the drawer last night at about eleven o'clock. This morning it was gone, and I have not the least clue to its disappearance."

"What position did the drawer occupy?" the Superintendent asked, as she paused a moment.

"It was at the back of another drawer, which had to be taken out before the jewel-casket could be reached. It was opened by touching a secret spring."

"And the desk itself?"

"Was made to order for me, some years ago."

"You say no one but yourself knew of the existence of this drawer?"

"No one but the cabinet-maker, and—my husband—who died three years ago."

The tones died away in a whisper. So the confirmed melancholy of the face, the heavy crape shrouding the slender figure—these were accounted for.

"I must know something of your house—your family, madam."

"My house is an ordinary one—33, South Crescent. It is, I believe, the middle house. My bedroom is the second floor back The desk stands near the window, and at right-angles with it. I have no family except my servants—a housekeeper, whose son lives in the house, and a man cook."

"What is your opinion of the honesty of these persons?"

"The cook has never, to my knowledge, entered those rooms. My housekeeper, an old lady and dear friend, is above suspicion. So, also, is her son."

The Superintenent shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"You probably, in your profession, suspect everybody," the lady said, a little sharply.

"Pardon, madam, not everybody. Is her son employed about the house?"

"He—I at one time employed him as a coachman, but he was not trustworthy."

"Yet above suspicion, you say?"

"He is too fond of his glass. I do not believe he is a thief. Last night he did not come home at all."

"Ah!"

"You seem to attach some significance to that fact?"

"That is inevitable."

"I mentioned it simply to prove that he was——"

The Superintendent nodded, in a manner which said that the logic of a lady was often unlike that of a police-officer, and that different conclusions might be drawn from the same premises.

"You are sometimes away from home?" he said, in an interrogative tone.

"Very seldom. My life is a secluded one. This is the first time I have been out of doors for over a month, and I receive no visitors."

"No one has ever seen you open this drawer?"

"No one, I am positive."

"And there is nothing missing but the ring?"

"There was nothing else in the drawer—in the house. My other jewels—I wear no ornaments now of any kind, but I had many at the time this drawer was made for them—have been for months in the care of the Safe Deposit Company."

"Was the ring marked, madam?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"A date and initials—mine and ——"

"Your late husband's?"

"Not my husband's."

The Superintendent was studying with great interest the point of a pencil which he had picked up from his desk.

"Are you willing to tell me why this was the only piece of jewellery you kept in the house? Not unless you are willing, you understand," he added as she shrank a little.

"I will tell you, certainly," she said, in so frank a voice that he wondered how he could have supposed her reluctant. "Because it is the only link between me and a past which is precious. It was the only thing worth keeping in all my miserable and disappointed life. So much for the sentiment of the matter, if you care to hear it; though no one who could in any possible way be connected with it is now living."

"Your doors were locked on the night in question?"

"As they always are. I am a light sleeper, too, always. But, above all, sir," she added with great emphasis, "bear in mind what I have told you of the construction of this drawer. I would have risked that desk in the hands of fifty burglars. The jewel casket could not have been discovered unless the desk was broken to pieces. Now, have you any theory about it?"

"One—and it must be the correct one, or my experience goes for nothing. The ring was taken by your housekeeper's son."

"Impossible!"

"I merely give you my opinion."

The lady looked greatly distressed.

"Are you willing that the young man should be watched for a few days? He need never know that he is an object of suspicion, unless we have reason to believe him guilty?"

"I will trust it to your judgment, sir," the lady said reluctantly.

The Superintendent drew toward him a memorandum-book.

"Your name, please?" he asked, as he wrote down the number of the house she had incidentally mentioned.

"Mrs. Westerton."

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"And the young man?"

"John Cheyne, at present employed in Holley's Parcel Office, Broad Street."

"Do not fear, madam, that we shall disturb him now, or at any future time, without your express permission."

The Superintendent of Police was as practical and prosaic a man as could be found anywhere; but he was completely fascinated by the lady's face and manner. Her voice, too—it was wonderfully musical, but the saddest he had heard in his life.

"Nonsense!" he mentally ejaculated, ten minutes after she had left him. "At my time of life! Sixty-two, and as bald as ——"

He rubbed his hands vigorously over his head, and then set as vigorously to work on a pile of papers lying on his desk.

On his way home that night he called upon Captain Farleigh, the Divisional Superintendent, one of the most valued men in the force—the intimate friend and confidant of his Chief.

"Queer case to-day, Farleigh," the Chief Superintendent began, caressing a little Scotch terrier, which showed extravagant delight at his presence. And he related all the details of his interview with Mrs. Westerton.

The Captain looked interested.

"You're on the right track, no doubt. The idea of your fascinating caller knowing anything of the way in which such rascalities are carried on."

"And her house is only a stone's throw from this station," the Superintendent remarked. "It will be easy for you to keep an eye on it for a while—see who goes out and comes in. I believe every syllable she says; and yet—put Willis on the track of this young Cheyne. He's a lynx, Willis is, and if there's any crooked work going on he'll get at it in no time. I'd give a good deal to recover that ring for her—I admit that much, Farleigh." And with a laugh the Chief Superintendent passed out into the street.

It was several days before the two men met again.

"Anything going on at 33, South Crescent?" the Chief asked, pointing with his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the house.

Captain Farleigh shook his head.

"The hinges of the front door have a good chance to grow rusty this rainy weather," he remarked. "I doubt if the door has been opened since the lady passed through it to go to you. Lang has grown quite excited over it—had a glimpse of the lady's face once at the window, and has raved over her ever since as wildly as you did. I believe he's watching the house by night as well as by day, though I've no idea what for. Perhaps he has."

"How about the suspicious John Cheyne?"

"I should judge from Willis's report that he's about as harmless an idiot as you could find—knows enough to get drunk occasionally; but even then generally has some one at his elbow to jog it for him. He never took that ring—that I could swear to—unless it was left under his nose."

"Who did it, then?"

"A question easier asked than answered."

The Chief shrugged his shoulders.

"I hate to find myself so far out of my reckoning. I'd counted on making an easy job of this matter. Positively I was fool enough to believe that I could find that ring in the first pawnbroker's shop, and so far I've not discovered it. There's a further development in that diamond-ring case, Farleigh. I had another note from the lady this morning."

"Another note? You don't mean to say that——"

"Yes, I've written to her several times."

"And what in the world——"

"About the ring, of course. I've told her what we were doing, and how little reason young Cheyne had given to confirm my suspicions of him. I knew that would please her, as it's easy to see that she's mighty fond of the boy's mother."

The Captain was laughing, and as the Chief slapped him on the shoulder he laughed in his turn.

"Oh, it's no use. I'm not such a fool as that—don't believe it! But it's been a little excitement—a little recreation. It's done me good, and I warrant it hasn't hurt her. Hurt her! That woman has done one hurt, if I'm not mistaken, that will last her for her life. And every breath she breathes is devoted to the memory of some dear love or other. Happy Ghost. I'd almost be willing to change places with him, whoever or whatever he is. 'Tisn't her husband, that's certain. Look at this!"

As he spoke he took from his pocket and unfolded the note of which he had spoken, pointing to the elaborate monogram at the top of the sheet.

"That's superb," the Captain said, examining it with great interest.

The Superintendent read the note aloud:

"Mrs. Westerton desires to again express her sincere thanks to the Superintendent of Police for the great interest which he has shown in the matter upon which his advice was solicited, but begs that he will make no further investigation, as she has reason to believe that she has herself found the clue to the disappearance of her property."

Captain Farleigh gave a low whistle, and then laughed.

"Your correspondence does not seem to have passed beyond the first formalities."

"I can't flatter myself that it ever would, but I've taken no end of comfort just in those. It's easy enough to see how a man could break his heart over a woman like that. I should pity a fellow who loved her hopelessly—mind you, I don't propose to try that little experiment myself. I wish you could see her for yourself once. But, sentiments aside, I should like to know what clue she has found in this business, and I'm blest if I don't find out!"

He did this in a straightforward way. He called in person the next day at 33, South Crescent, and was ushered in by the housekeeper, through the seldom used front door, into a tiny, but magnificently furnished, reception room. He sent up no card.

"A gentleman on business," was the message delivered by the servant to her mistress.

Mrs. Westerton did not keep her guest waiting. He heard instantly the rustle of her dress on the stairs, and as she sat facing him in the little room, she was lovelier, yet even sadder, if that were possible, than she had seemed at their first interview.

Though her recognition was ready, and her greeting cordial, it seemed to her visitor as if it were the body only of the woman who stood there—as if the spirit was unconscious of his presence. He found more difficulty than he had anticipated in opening the conversation.

"You will not think it strange, perhaps, Mrs. Westerton, that I have not only a great deal of interest, but no little curiosity, in the matter you confided to me, and more than ever since your note of yesterday. You may consider me presumptuous, but my object in calling was to ask you if you are willing to tell me on whom your suspicion rests—what clue you have found to this most mysterious robbery. The more I have thought of this case, the more it has puzzled me."

Mrs. Westerton made an uneasy motion with her hands, which were lying in her lap. She glanced about the room, out of the window, then back to his face again. For the first time since she had entered the room she seemed to be conscious of herself and of him.

"I don't know, after all, why I should not tell you," she began, in a voice that sounded faint and far off. "My husband, whom I thought dead long ago, is still living. I told you, you remember, that he knew the secret of the jewel-casket."

The Superintendent gazed at her in amazement.

"But, even then," he said, after a long pause, "how could——"

The lady made an impatient gesture.

"Don't ask me any questions as to how he could do anything. You might like to know what my life has been for the last ten hideous years— since I was George Westerton's wife! I married him from pique—while angry with the only man whom I really cared for—and he married me for my money. It was a fair bargain—that is, neither of us tried to deceive the other, though he was a much worse man than I ever suspected. I found it out quickly enough—after I had married him. No doubt it was he himself who three years ago sent me notice of his own death. I believe now that it was another of the

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countless traps he was continually setting for me—Heaven knows why! We both knew that the man to whom I was engaged before my marriage was killed in Australia. He certainly could trust me with all the rest of the world—after that."

"And you have seen him?"

"No. My housekeeper has, however. Accidentally, at the window of one of the houses at the back of this one—a lodging-house. And he has taken my ring; I am sure of it. There's no use in asking me how; I don't know."

It was a woman's unreasoning conviction. It admitted no argument.

. . . . . .

"A queer affair, altogether," the Chief remarked that night to Captain Farleigh, as they sat confidentially together. "I've no doubt that Mrs. Westerton's theory is the correct one. It's plausible enough. I'd like to get a good hold on that fellow, but she won't listen to it, even though she admits that she'd give five years of her life for that ring. Little she cares now for fifty years of it, I fancy."

"It must have been a rather unsatisfactory interview, almost as unsatisfactory as the correspondence, now that you find that she's not the widow of some saint, but the wife of some scoundrel. I know you hate to give up when you've undertaken to find out anything, so you ought to have some comfort in knowing where the ring has probably gone to, even if you don't quite——"

He stopped abruptly as two officers entered the police-station, having in custody a man—a gentleman, he might be called, judging from his dress alone. But his well-made clothes were bespattered with the mud of the street. His hat was gone, his dishevelled hair and bleeding face made him a pitiable object to look upon.

With the group was a fourth person, an elderly man, who followed them in a state of great excitement.

"This is the man, sir," he said rapidly, addressing Captain Farleigh, "whom the police hunted for two years ago to answer for the forgery in the Barford Bank robbery. The very man, sir!—I know! Call on me for evidence. I'm on my way out of town on business to-night; but I'll be back to-morrow, sir, and early, sir, to help this rascal to his place in gaol, sir!"

With a menacing glance at the man so designated, and a hasty comparison of his watch with the clock of the police-station, he rushed out again into the street.

"The gentleman recognised him," one of the policemen explained, "and there was a street fight before we got to them. If this had been loaded it might have made short work of somebody," and he laid a pistol on the desk; "that is, if he had not been too drunk to use it. I had to call for help before I could capture him, drunk as he is."

"Your name?" the Captain demanded of the prisoner, his pencil suspended in his fingers.

The man made no reply. He had fixed his eyes on the face of the questioner, while a curious change passed over his own.

"Your prisoner is not so drunk as you think, Willis," the Captain remarked, *sotto voce*. "What's your name?" he repeated.

"Do you ask that question in your social or professional capacity, Bertram Farleigh?" was the man's reply. "You do not seem to have the pleasure of my acquaintance, though I have long had the pleasure and honour of yours."

The Captain eyed him sharply, though with very little curiosity.

"Your name?" he asked impatiently.

"Perhaps you will be more interested in that of—Heloise Sayre!"

The Captain, with a blanched face, stared at him as if paralysed, then rose suddenly and passed his hand over his eyes.

"Search him!" he said, shortly, to one of the officers.

"How's this, Farleigh?" And the Chief Superintendent laid his hand on the younger man's shoulder, while his eyes twinkled. "I'd no idea that you ever had a weakness for any woman under the sun. How is it?"

There was a sharp, metallic click as something taken from the prisoner's pocket fell on the floor and rolled to the feet of the Superintendent.

He picked it up. It was a diamond ring of great beauty, in a peculiar setting.

"I'm getting to be a monomaniac on the diamond ring subject," he said with a laugh. "Here, tell me if it's marked, I'm afraid to look at it myself for fear that it isn't hers."

"About one chance in a—Great Heaven!"

"Recognise it, do you?" the prisoner exclaimed, as he watched the little transaction. "I thought you would. 'Tisn't so very many years ago since you had the best of it, and I hated you accordingly. Not that I cared so much for her, but I wanted my own way, and I got it—with her, and her money, too! You can return the ring with my compliments, so long as I can't help myself; and if she's curious as to how I got it, tell her I've been a neighbour of hers for some time—could watch her back window from mine, and didn't find it very hard this midsummer weather—with windows wide open—to make a visit to her desk."

The Captain turned suddenly toward his Chief.

"Do you hear? Do you understand?" he demanded; but the Superintendent had left the police-station.

"Heloise was never particularly happy with me," the man went on, notwithstanding the attempts of the officers to check his speech. "She might have been if she'd married Captain Farleigh. I told her you had been killed in Australia. Queer business you've drifted into Bertram Farleigh."

The man had been thoroughly searched. A miscellaneous collection taken from his pockets lay on the Captain's desk; but the Captain, with an expression on his face so new and strange as to attract even the attention of the officers, fingered the pistol which lay near the rest of the man's possessions.

"This should do good service for once if it were loaded," he said, with dry white lips. "I know you now; I swore long ago that I would have the life of the man who married Heloise Sayre if I ever found out who he was!"

"Better put it down, though," the man sneered, "and treat me to a better sort of hospitality, as I've come to spend the night with you."

The Captain raised the pistol and held it aimed at the man's head, while his breath came hard and fast.

"Farleigh! What's this?"

He turned quickly to face the Chief Superintendent, who, with a dexterous movement, sent the pistol flying across the room. A lady stood by the Chief, gazing at Captain Farleigh.

"Bert, Bert!" she gasped, in a half whisper and with dilated eyes. Beyond him she saw her husband. She turned to the Superintendent, clinging to him for support.

"Why have you brought me here?" she asked in a husky voice.

"To identify this man—this ring," and he took up the jewel. "You will not refuse now to let the law protect you—to take——"

"This is a most unexpected pleasure, Heloise," George Westerton sneered, looking at his wife; "but since you're here, I'd like to ask where's the rest of the jewellery you used to keep in your writing-desk cabinet? I looked for it a few days ago, and if I'd found it I shouldn't have been in this hole. I kept the ring by me as a sort of small change, you know, in case I should need it. But the game's up. It never was worth the candle. Give my respects to the old gentleman when he calls in the morning. He's right enough about the bank business. You can keep the pistol to remember me by, Bertram Farleigh. Ta-ta."

With a quick movement he drew from the lining of his sleeve a small dirk-knife. It flashed in the light for an instant, and then he plunged it into his heart.

With a shriek, she hid her face upon the Chief Superintendent's shoulder, and, with his arm about her, he led her out of the police-station.

It was not more than ten minutes before he returned. Captain Farleigh was alone. Upon a bench, his face covered with a handkerchief, lay the body of the suicide, whose blood stained the floor.

"Mrs. Westerton has her ring once more, Farleigh," the Chief Superintendent said quietly. "I put it back on her finger myself—for you. After awhile you will go and see it there. You have my permission, and my blessing, my boy!"

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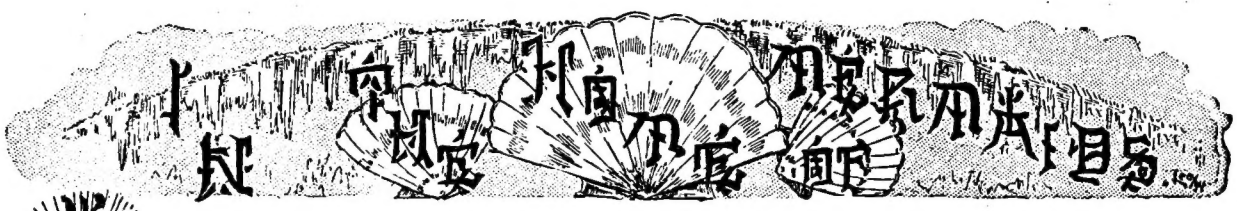


AMONG all the young men of Kishigato none were so handsome as Nee Saki. Kishigato was a village on the coast of Japan, but readers of SHORT STORIES will look in vain to find it on the map, for the name was changed long ago. Nee Saki was only a fisherman, but he was envied by the young men of the higher classes because of his jet-black hair, his bright eyes, his clear skin, his fine figure, his strength and alertness, and the easy grace of his movements.

Pretty girls of his own class looked upon him as one whose smile was worth winning, while the maidens of higher degree often wished that he had been born in their own class, or they in his, so that they might allow him to know how much they admired him, and how gratefully they would esteem his love.

Indeed, some of them could not command themselves so completely as to prevent their eyes lighting up when he happened to look straight at them; but Nee Saki was modest, and regarded the glances bestowed upon him as being the signs of kindly feeling only, rather than evidence of admiration, and of something even deeper.

Nee Saki might often have fallen in love, for many were the devices made by the maidens of Kishigato to draw him into the meshes of mutual admiration and affection. But the lad's heart was too full of love for his old father and mother to allow him to think of courting.

His days were spent in drawing finny prey from the depths of the sea, and in selling what he had caught. He was lucky as a fisherman, and brought to market the finest, largest, and sweetest fish caught in the waters surrounding the beautiful island.

It followed as a matter of course that he prospered in the market, for apart from the excellence of his fish, it was a pleasure to buy from a lad who was as polite and obliging to his customers as he was good to his father and mother. As to his evenings, he spent them at home, telling his parents of his adventures on the seas and of his success in dealings with the people of the village.

Early one morning, Nee Saki went out in his boat as usual to fish, and was as lucky as ever. He was very light-hearted, and sung as he had often sung before. His songs were mostly of his own composition, telling of his fondness for the sea and his love for the pursuit that enabled him to bestow comfort upon his parents in their old age.

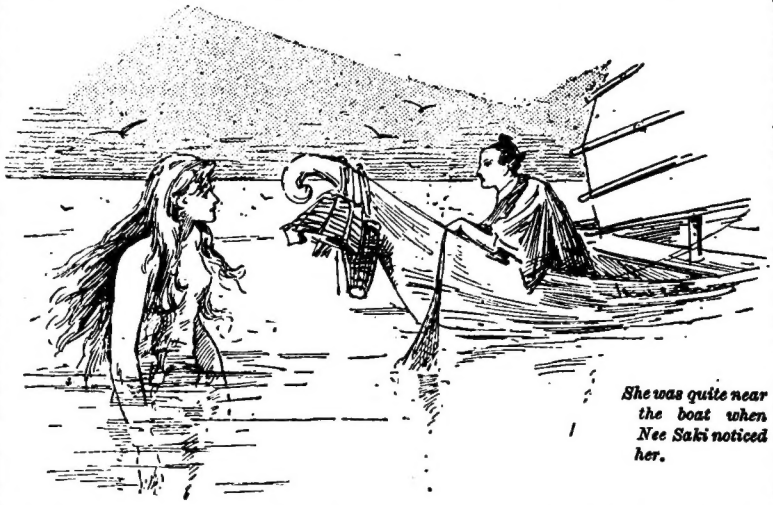
Very often when he had sung on other days he had seen mermaids at a distance sometimes drawing near to him and then hurrying away. Were it not that he was so modest he would have perceived that they were listening to his songs, and would have guessed that they wished to get a closer view of his handsome face, but lost courage as they drew nearer to him.

On this day one of the strange sea-maidens bolder than the rest led them all in their approach. One after another the others turned back, but this one came steadily on followed at last by only two or three, and finally deserted even by these. She was quite near the boat when Nee Saki noticed her for the first time. He had never seen among all the maidens on shore one who was half so beautiful. Certainly so strange a being he had never seen or dreamed of. Filled with wonder and admiration he sang no longer.

"Sing on, gentle youth," the mermaid said; "it is your singing that has made us your friends. We have kept the storm from your boat and lured the fish to your lines, for we love to have you near us. Gladly enough would we have you visit us in our beautiful home beneath the waves. There you would know nothing of toil, but would pass all the long day in pleasure."

"But my thoughts are not always of pleasure," Nee Saki replied; "and I enjoy my toil, for through it all I see the contented faces of my old father and mother. Making them happy is happiness to me. However, if it pleases you, I will sing, for singing lightens my toil."

So Nee Saki sang as he cast his lines and drew in many a fine fish. The mermaid listened, with her eyes fixed upon his face so steadily that soon he began to feel more inclined to look upon her lovely features than to watch his lines. Then, as his song grew more earnest in its praise of the sea, she joined him in tones so sweet that he paused to listen to her. Alone she sang, and her words and music filled him with such a longing to visit the wonderful home she described that he sat entranced. As he listened eagerly she began to float away with the tide.



She was quite near the boat when Nee Saki noticed her.

"Come back! Come back, and go to my home with me," cried the young fisherman. But the mermaid sang and beckoned, going further away from him all the time. Father, mother, and the little home in the village, his many friends, and all else were forgotten in a moment, and, leaping into the sea, he swam swiftly to the side of the mermaid, who waited till he reached her, when both sank beneath the waves.

Nee Saki had been under the water often, for he was an expert diver, and from great depths he had looked up through the sea to admire the changing colours as the broken rays of light struggled down, down towards him. But he was not prepared for the sight that met his vision as he went deeper and deeper, his heart growing all the time lighter. Now and then some frightful fish, such as he had thought were known only to the writers of fables, rushed towards him as if to devour him, but turned back and hastened away when the mermaid waved her hand and placed herself between the monster and the youth. At length they reached a beautiful grotto, where flowers of rare beauty were seen on every hand. Sweet music filled Nee Saki's ears as the two entered.

"Here is our home," the mermaid said—"your home and mine."

A night and day were passed in bewildering pleasures.

The Number will consist almost entirely of Stories by Well-known Authors, profusely Illustrated throughout.

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Another night and a day added to Nee Saki's new-found happiness, for the mermaid and her companions were busy every moment getting up some new surprise But on the third night Nee Saki could not rest. The forgotten home, with the old father and mother mourning for their son and wondering as to his fate came to him in dreams that caused him to waken weeping almost as soon as he would fall asleep. In the morning he was unhappy. Vainly his companion tried to cheer him, and her attendants were tireless in assisting her.

"I am weary of pleasure," Nee Saki said, when she asked him what troubled him. "I am weary of pleasure. I long to see my good old father and mother, from whom I have never been absent more than a day until now; and I long to be once more at the toil that gives them comfort. You must let me depart."

The mermaid pleaded with him to stay, but he would not listen. Go he must, and go he would. When she found him thus determined she sorrowfully prepared to guide him back to his boat. Just before departing she placed about his neck a golden chain to which a golden locket was attached.

"Keep it for my sake always," she said; "but for your own sake do not dare to open the locket."

Back towards the sunshine, with a heart lighter even than it had been as he descended into the waters, Nee Saki was conducted by the mermaid to where his boat lay dancing on the waves. His fish were as fresh as though he had just caught them, and as the mermaid left him with a sad parting song upon her lips, he turned the bow of his boat towards the shore and broke into a glad song about his home and parents.

So glad was he to be near home again that he did not notice the changes that had taken place on the shore during his absence. He paid no attention to the strange faces of the people whom he met as he hurried toward the home where he expected both welcome and reproof, nor did he notice the curious look with which the people regarded him. He had no patience for walking, but ran.

At last the street was reached where he had left his parents only a few days before, but he looked in vain for their cottage. He broke into a bitter cry.

"What ails thee, youth?" he was asked by an old man passing by.

He could not speak for weeping, except only to repeat the names of his father and mother.

"Why, those whom you name died a hundred years ago," the old man exclaimed.

"A hundred years ago! Why, thou sayest an untruth, old man," said the lad. "It is scarce three days since I saw them here, alive and well."

The old man shook his head in pity and passed on, saying, "Alas, poor boy, thou hast been forsaken by thy wits."

Night was near, and Nee Saki began to feel a strange dread. He clutched at the locket on his breast, and gazing upon it exclaimed:

"That sorceress of the sea has placed an evil spell on me. I will break it."

He opened the locket. It was a fatal thing to do. Held captive within had been the demons of a whole century, for Nee Saki had passed a hundred years with the mermaids. The demons fell upon him, and some of them started for the shore where he had left his boat. Those who stayed scratched deep wrinkles in his face and breathed upon his black locks until the hair grew thin and white. He tried to run from them, but tottered and fell. Weaker and weaker he grew through the night. In the morning those who first visited the spot where he fell found the corpse of an old, old man, and those who visited the shore where he landed found an old boat decayed and gone to pieces.

Found the corpse of an old, old man.

TO GAIN £200

"I HAVE put up the shutters, sir."

"All right, Thomas; you can go home. And remember that you need not be here till eleven to-morrow. I am going over to Lanchester to spend the night, and shall not be back till then. I don't suppose we shall miss custom if we open a little later."

"I don't suppose we shall, sir," said Thomas with a smile. "There was nobody in till twelve to day—and not many after," he added to himself. "I'll be here at eleven to take the shutters down, sir," he said aloud, as he started for home.

Mr. Tom Gorville looked after him as he went. Then he said under his breath to himself:

"Well, if all goes well, you won't find any shutters to take down, my boy."

Mr. Tom Gorville had been a year in business at Lesterbury, and he had not prospered there. When he married and embarked all his little capital in the shop in the High Street his hopes had been very high. An optician was just what Lesterbury wanted. Although the town itself was a small one he would be able to count upon all the surrounding villages for custom and the gentlefolk of the neighbourhood would swarm to his shop for their magic-lanterns, field-glasses, and microscopes.

After the shop was taken, poor Gorville discovered that the gentlefolk took no interest in magic-lanterns or microscopes, or, if they did, they ran up to London for them, while the people of the place who wanted spectacles gave their patronage to a modest little man in a back alley, who had provided for their wants for twenty years before Gorville's advent.

It had not taken Gorville the whole year to find out that he had made a mistake. It seemed to him that he had ruined his career at the outset by one false step.

If he could but get rid of his debts he might still think of moving his stock into some more promising town, and beginning again there, much more modestly than he had done

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at Lesterbury. But unless he got money from somewhere his stock would be sold off by his creditors.

If he could but raise £200, he had said over and over again to himself, he could start again; but where was the money to come from? They had no rich friends. Edme, his wife, had gone up to London that day to see if she could coax a loan from her only well-to-do relative, a crusty bachelor uncle; but the prospect was not in the least hopeful, because the crusty bachelor uncle had never been known to unloosen his purse-strings to anybody.

Gorville had not the least hope from that direction, the only reason, in fact, why he had allowed his wife to take the journey was to further a last plan which had been building itself gradually in his mind, and which even Edme did not share. He was going to burn down his shop. The premium would be due again in three weeks' time, and with all his ready money spent on the year's living, Gorville saw not the slightest means of paying it.

Nothing is more terrible than the ease with which a man who has determined on wrong-doing can persuade himself that his crime is justifiable. It was only when the thought of his wife finding out what he meditated came into his mind that the plan seemed at all hideous to him.

Whatever happened, he told himself, Edme must never know. She would not see the affair in its right light at all—any more than the police and the insurance company would.

So his wife had left on a wild-goose chase to her uncle, where she was to stay the night, and, by the greatest of good fortunes, her brother at Lanchester, twelve miles away, had invited him to spend the night at his rooms. It seemed as if chance was assisting his designs.

"It must be to-night, if it is done at all," said the optician to himself, when his combined errand-boy and assistant left him alone in the house.

It was half-past eight. At nine he was to leave the house for the station to catch the train for Lanchester. Within half-an-hour, if the thing was to be done, he must take the final step. His plans had been prepared carefully.

Down in the cellar below the shop, which was crowded with packing-cases and straw, was a cheap American clock, with a piece of string attached to the hammer of the alarm. The string was connected with a delicately poised basin of acid, so that the slightest tug would overturn the liquid into another basin of chemicals beneath. The effect would be a sudden burst of flame which could not well fail to ignite the dry straw which Gorville had carefully laid close to it. Then, after the fire had burned a few minutes, and consumed the string tied to the alarm, what suspicion could possibly be aroused by the presence of two basins and a clock among the ruins in the cellar?

None at all. People might possibly shake their heads—they always do—and say with a sneer that it was very fortunate for Gorville and his wife both to be away on the very night that the premises were burned, that it was fortunate for Gorville to have the fire just as the insurance premium was due, and so on—but nobody could ever find out for a certainty that the fire was planned; the insurance company would have to pay him the £200, and his difficulties would be at an end.

Then he groped his way down to the cellar below the shop, struck a light, and wound up the alarm. Five minutes later he was in the street again, hurrying to catch the train.

. . . . . .

Tom Gorville found when he arrived at his brother-in-law's rooms that his host was not yet home. He had been called away on business, the landlady said; but hoped to be back before his guest's arrival. He had not come, however, and poor Tom was left to his own thoughts once more. He tried not to go back to the old question, telling himself that the deed was irretrievable.

There was certainly no train back to Lesterbury that night, but it was only twelve miles away, and, if he started to walk at once, he could get back before one o'clock. He had timed the alarm to go off at one, thinking that there would be less risk then of anybody being about to notice the fire and stop it before it had well begun. If he walked back he would just be in time to undo his work. But he let the opportunity pass, and did not start.

His brother-in-law came in after eleven, full of apologies and grumbling at the train, which had been delayed by an accident for two hours or more.

"You haven't seen Edme, then?" he said, as soon as he had taken off his greatcoat, and Tom looked puzzled.

"Edme? She is in London."

"Oh, no, she isn't," said her brother. "I met her on the platform at Clunted going home. She had changed her mind, she said; she was keeping a secret evidently. I asked her to come here with me, and promised to make myself a bed on the sofa, but Edme preferred going home. She said she would get there before you started, and if not you weren't to bother; she was awfully tired, and would just get herself a cup of tea and go to bed. I was sure to tell you not to hurry back on her account. What is the matter, man?"

For Gorville had sprung to his feet white and wild-eyed.

"Edme is at home?" he repeated hoarsely.

"Yes, sure to be, and asleep in bed by this time."

"Then, great Heaven, what have I done?" gasped Gorville, and groped his way out into the hall for his hat.

"My dear fellow, you can't go back to-night, there is no train," cried the brother, in astonishment; but Tom Gorville did not hear him, he was running as hard as he could in the direction of the railway station.

"There must be some train back," he kept telling himself; but the hope was a vain one. There was no way of getting to Lesterbury that night by rail. His next thought was to run, but there was only an hour and a half left now before the fire he had planned would spring into being to destroy his loved wife, and the distance was twelve miles.

Outside the station, however, he found a cab, the horse in good condition, and by dint of wild promises which he hoped to fulfil somehow, he managed to persuade the man to start at a fairly good rate on the twelve miles' journey.

It was a quarter-past one when they reached the High Street, and all was dark and still. With a great throb of relief Gorville noticed that the shop was still standing untouched. But when he opened the door he found that the house was full of smoke.

With a beating heart he groped his way up to his wife's room on the floor above, fearing to think what he might find there. The smoke was not dense, but the conscience-stricken apprehension made him almost certain Edme would be dead.

He was more frightened still when he found the room empty. There were signs that his wife had been in the place, but she was there no longer, and poor Tom Gorville pursued his search through the smoke-filled house with greater and greater dread. He was making his way down to the cellar where he had planned the fire, when, in passing through the shop, a faint light appeared in the opposite doorway, and Edme herself came towards him with a candle in her hand.

Her face was pale and distraught, and she made no attempt to greet him. She stood in the doorway at the farther end of the shop, and looked at him with sad eyes.

It was a great relief to him to find her uninjured; but, somehow, he could not feel any happiness or sense of relief. The look in his wife's eyes froze every emotion. The silence was painful.

Gorville struggled to break it.

"The place seems to be on fire," he said, feeling weakly foolish as he said it.

Edme answered solemnly:

"Yes, I have just managed to put it out."

"All alone?"

"Yes. I thought it would be best if I could."

Her voice sounded hard and mechanical, but suddenly she burst out crying:

"Oh, Tom—Tom! I am so glad you have come. Say that you did not do it—say that you did not!"

She looked at him imploringly, but her husband, conscience-stricken, only held down his head.

It was a terrible half-hour for the confessed incendiary. The news which his wife had hastened back to tell was that Uncle Jonadab had been generous—he had given her £200.

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Amongst the Story Writers who are represented may be mentioned Messrs. Headon Hill, G. B. Burgin, W. L. Alden, and George Griffith.

A VISIT FROM MR. CALLAGHAN.

MR. CALLAGHAN was busily engaged in an inspection of silver-ware that seemed to interest him exceedingly. He examined each article carefully, often stopping long enough to test the particular object with his teeth, or even to bend it. At the same time, his actions were quiet and, one might say, reserved. He did not appear to care to be noticed.

He was a rather tall young fellow, "carelessly dressed," as they say in novels, and had a pale face, like a student's. One might, indeed, have thought him a poor student, were it not for his eyes, which, instead of looking tired and dreamy, like a student's, were exceedingly active and restless. On the whole, his face and his general appearance were not prepossessing. Indeed, the policeman on the beat most frequented by Mr. Callaghan in social life reported him at the Bridewell as "a regular tough 'un."

Mr. Callaghan, though very young, had already learned the value of exceeding caution. Hence he was almost noiseless, and he inspected the silver ware in the very mild light of a half-opened dark lantern. A happy smile played around the corners of his face the while, for the silver-ware he was examining proved to be of the finest and newest, and bore the monogram of a famous family. For that matter, the entire surroundings of Mr. Callaghan at the time were of the richest. The very sideboard at which he laboured was worth a small fortune, and the cut glass upon it looked very beautiful in the mellow light. There were rich red tints in some of the glass-ware, occasioned by their contents, but Mr. Callaghan did not stop to examine them. He did not believe in drinking during business hours. The time was something after midnight.

Mr. Callaghan was aroused from his preoccupation by a faint click. It sounded very much like the click of a trigger as a revolver is cocked. It was a trifle startling, but he did not lose his presence of mind. He faced around like a flash, and turned off the rays of his dark lantern. He knew it was almost useless to take the latter precaution, however, for he was well informed, and he knew that in the houses of the rich of to-day it required but the touching of a switch to turn on a full stream of electric lights throughout an entire floor. The sudden burst of light came, just as he expected it would, and as it did so he heard a voice say:

"Don't dare to move."

He was more startled by the voice than he was by the sudden glare of the electric lights, for it was the voice of a young girl. Mr. Callaghan blinked, took a good look, and then his thin face broadened into a smile. At the other end of the room stood a very pale but resolute girl in a pink dressing-gown. She had a little gold-mounted revolver of a calibre so small that Mr. Callaghan, but for his natural politeness, would have laughed at it outright, and she was biting her lip for she was apparently very nervous. The revolver was pointed in Mr. Callaghan's direction, but, alas! the hand that held it was shaking very perceptibly. Callaghan grinned.

"Isn't it rather late for you to be out?" he asked her.

"Don't dare to move," she replied. "I know precisely what to do. Papa told me before he went away. I am going to sound the burglar-alarm, and have you arrested. Then you will be sent to prison."

"Well," almost laughed Mr. Callaghan, "why don't you do it? I'm waiting."

"Because," she answered hesitatingly—"because you're standing in front of it."

"Oh, I am?" answered Callaghan. "Then I'll move away. I always like to be polite to ladies."

He moved away a few steps.

She frowned a little bit. Then she said:

"Excuse me, will you please move a little further away?"

"Certainly," he answered. "Anything to oblige a real lady."

She stepped towards the alarm, which Callaghan had not until then perceived, and stretched forth her hand. She was about to turn the handle, when Callaghan said, hastily:

"Hold on a minute. Do you think that would be a nice thing to do?"

"Of course it would," she murmured.

"Just think about it a moment," Callaghan continued. "If you do that, I'll be arrested, and sent to prison for fifteen or twenty years. Fifteen or twenty years in a little cell all to myself, with no one to talk to and nothing to do—except break stones for my health. Now, I don't care anything about myself. Of course I haven't done you any wrong. I haven't got away with the silver, and therefore there isn't any wrong done—is there? I tried to, but you have got the best of me, and you're an awfully brave little girl to do it, too. But just think of yourself during the next fifteen or twenty years, if you have me taken. Every day you'll be thinking about the poor fellow who's doing time because you made him, and every night you'll be lying awake crying because you made him suffer so much for such a little thing, and every time the minister in your church says anything about forgiving your enemies you'll be thinking he means you, and——"

She broke in:

"I think I'll let you go"—she said it very earnestly.

Callaghan laughed aloud.

"That's right," he said, "I knew you would, for I knew you were a lady the minute I saw you. I didn't mean what I said. Probably in a month you'd forget all about me. No one remembers a fellow who's doing time but the police and the detectives. I was just trying an experiment. Do you think I was afraid you'd call the police? Nonsense! Do you think I was afraid of your little revolver? Nonsense! I've been shot twice by real revolvers. If you had tried to sound the burglar-alarm, do you know what I'd have done? I'd have made a quick jump for you, and I'd have had my hands about your throat before you could have winked. If you had fired the revolver, you would have missed me. Girls can't shoot."

He said this last almost contemptuously; but he was sorry a moment afterwards, for he noticed that she was growing very white and very frightened too.

Nevertheless, he continued:

"And after I'd got my hands about your neck, and you couldn't scream or struggle, what do you suppose I'd have done?"

She did not reply. She could not speak. She was trembling violently.

"I'd have — I'd have"—he was embarrassed, and he actually blushed—Callighan blushed—"I'd have kissed you," he said with an effort, "and then I'd have gone away. But you needn't look frightened any longer. I ain't going to hurt you, and I ain't going to kiss you; for some day you'd be ashamed of it, and you'd be ashamed to tell your sweetheart that Jimmy Callaghan kissed you. And I ain't a-going to take anything that belongs to this house, although I could right before your eyes. I'm just a-going peaceably home."

He moved towards the window by which he had entered. As he did so, however, he looked at her critically, stopped, and said:

"You're going to hold out just about until I'm gone; then you're going to faint. I can't leave you here alone in a faint. I'll fix it."

He walked deliberately to the sideboard and poured out a glass of wine.

"Here," said he, "drink this, and then go upstairs to bed as quick as you can."

She took the wine with a frightened "Thank you," and drank it.

Mr. Callaghan turned to leave.

"That brings the red back in your cheeks," he said. "It's a good thing when not taken during business hours. Now I'm going, but I want you to remember that I'm not afraid of the burglar-alarm or the little revolver. I'm not going to rob you because—because you are so brave, and because you are so pretty. I sort of hate to make a failure of a job, but you are too pretty."

Saying which, Mr. Callaghan climbed nimbly through the window and disappeared.

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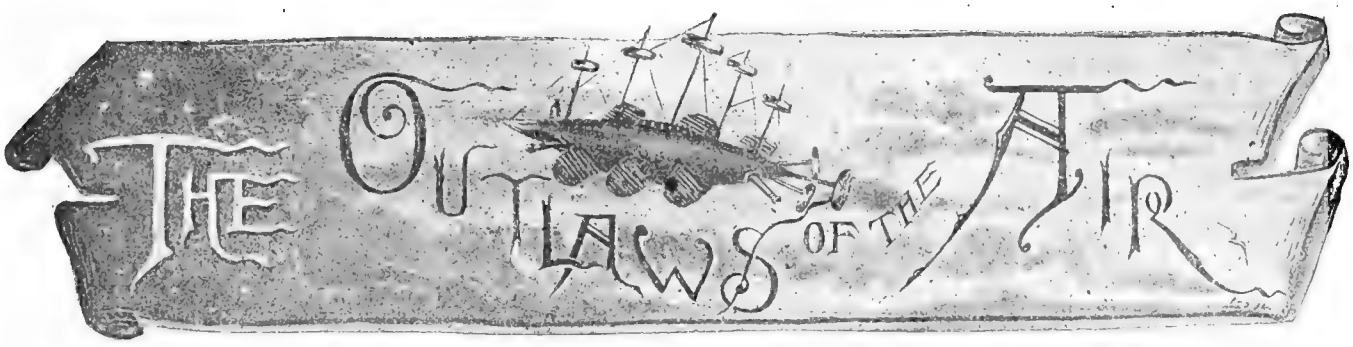


By George Griffith,

Author of "The Angel of the Revolution," "The Syren of the Skies," &c.

SUMMARY.

Max Renault—leading spirit of Anarchist Autonomie Group No. 7, who has joined the Utopians (a Socialistic colony on an island in the South Pacific) in order to steal the air-ship they are building, which he succeeds in doing.

Franz Hartog—a German engineer, in league with Renault, who steals a very fast torpedo-boat destroyer from the Russian Government to levy blackmail on the Atlantic.

Sir Harry Milton—a wealthy young English nobleman, who by chance comes across the island of Utopia, and subsequently devotes the whole of his fortune to hunting down Renault and Hartog.

Herbert Wyndham—a lieutenant in the British Navy who is travelling with Sir Harry for the benefit of his health, and who determines to resign his commission and couple his energies with those of Sir Harry in destroying the Anarchists, on account of the fact that he has been stabbed by Renault when the latter attempts to carry off Violet in the air-ship.

Frederick Austen—the inventor of the Utopian air-ship, who shares its secret with Edward Adams, Dr. Edwards, and Ambrose Millar, three other Utopians.

Violet Milton—Sir Harry's sister, and Lieutenant Wyndham's sweetheart, is fearfully injured by throwing herself out of the air-ship on which Renault has tried to carry her off.

Dora Merton—a fair Utopian, who has made an impression on Sir Harry.

Lucy Summers—another fair Utopian.

Max Renault in the air-ship joins Hartog in the *Destroyer*, after the latter has destroyed a fleet of war-ships convoying Atlantic liners. They are discovered in their hiding-place by a combined fleet of British, French, and Portuguese cruisers, who follow the *Pilgrim*, a steam yacht bringing war and other materials for the Anarchists. Renault in the *Vengeur*, and Hartog in the *Destroyer*, annihilate the fleet, and, at the last moment, a strange flying machine appears on the scene.

CHAPTER XIX.

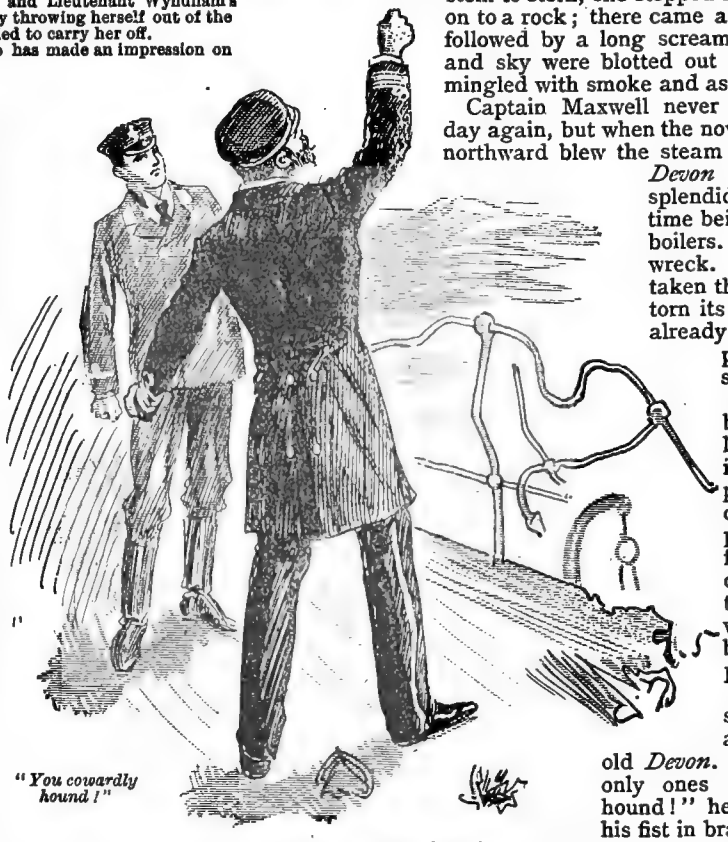
A Timely Rescue.

The words had scarcely passed the poor fellow's lips before he sprang convulsively into the air and fell to the deck, rolling and writhing in agony. A fire-shell had burst close to him, a stream of flames had passed over his bare feet, and as he fell back the choking poisonous fumes surged in dark waves about him and in a few moments ended his torments in death.

The armoured citadel on the centre of the bridge in which the captain of the *Devon* stood, with a senior midshipman to work the now useless signals, and a quarter-master at the wheel, had so far escaped the projectiles of the *Vengeur;* but though the head remained untouched the body was crippled and paralysed, and all communication between the two parts of the organism was virtually severed. The gallant *Devon* was in fact in the position of a man paralysed in every limb but still retaining his intellectual faculties. Her captain saw his terrible foe sinking lower and lower towards his now doomed vessel, and he was unable to order a shot to be fired against him.

Soon barely a thousand feet separated the air-ship from her now helpless prey, then, with deliberate aim, three of the ten-inch shells charged with anarchite, were dropped into the ragged gaping holes where the funnels had been. Captain Maxwell saw them fall, helpless to stretch out a hand to avert the disaster which he knew must now follow in a few moments. He felt the shock of the shells as they burst in the inmost recesses of the ship, then, with a shudder that shook her from stem to stern, she stopped as though she had run head-on to a rock; there came a report like a thunder-clap, followed by a long screaming roar, and ship and sea and sky were blotted out in a dense cloud of steam mingled with smoke and ashes.

Captain Maxwell never expected to see the light of day again, but when the now freshening breeze from the northward blew the steam cloud aft he saw that the *Devon* was still floating. Her splendid hull had withstood for the time being even the explosion of her boilers. She floated, but only as a wreck. The escaping steam had taken the line of least resistance and torn its way up through the decks already perforated in a hundred places by the *Vengeur's* shells.



"You cowardly hound!"

Of her top-works only the bridge remained anything like intact. The fierce burning breath of the steam had penetrated the air-holes of the citadel and scalded its occupants severely, though not fatally, and the moment the cloud had passed the captain threw open the steel door and went out on to the half-ruined bridge, saying to his companions:

"We may as well die outside as in there. We've about seen the last of the poor old *Devon*. I'm afraid we're about the only ones left alive. You cowardly hound!" he suddenly burst out, shaking his fist in brave but impotent defiance at the air-ship. "If I only had you in a fair and square fight, ship to ship and gun to gun, I'd—Hullo! Look yonder. As I'm a living man there's another of them! Just give me my glasses out of the citadel Mr. Clinton."

Looking up at the *Vengeur* had brought within his line of

Each story is adorned with numerous illustrations, and considering that amongst the artists are numbered Miss G. Demain Hammond, Miss Inez Warry, Monsieur Georges Montbard, and Messrs. Raymond Potter, E. S. Hope, and Sydney Harvey, I think I may safely assert that no Christmas Number issued this year will have such a splendid array of high-class illustrations.

sight the second air-ship, of whose approach the unfortunate seaman had given notice several minutes before. In the intense excitement of the moment the three survivors of the *Devon* forgot the pain of their burns, and the midshipman and the quartermaster uttered a cry of delight as the captain, without taking his glasses from his, said:

"Yes, there's no doubt about it. She's an air-ship, not a balloon, and she's flying the Jack. That means that, whatever she is, she's not in commission. I suppose she's a private venture. Just like our precious Admiralty, that. Leave everything to private enterprise until the best things are sold out of the country.

"Ah, of course, I see now. She's one of the Maxim æroplanes. I heard some time ago that after the War Office had refused to buy Maxim's rights, a big syndicate had been formed to develop them and keep them in the country. I suppose that's one of them. Well, I only hope—Ah, there he goes! The brute doesn't think us worth notice now, I suppose. Knows we're helpless. I wonder what he's up to."

"I fancy he's gone to bring up that *Destroyer*, sir," said Clinton, following with his glasses the now rapidly receding *Vengeur*, which had suddenly swept round in a wide curve to the southward, and was flying out to sea in a course at right angles to that of the new comer.

"Then, if he has, God help the *Ariel* and us!" said the captain, "for he'll sink her, and then that blackguard will come and torpedo us at his leisure. However, we'll go and see if any of our poor fellows are left alive. We may be able to do something for them. We might find a boat, too. But no, that's no good. I won't leave the *Devon* while she floats, and if we got away those blackguards would only sink us."

Wherever they were able to go they found a perfectly awful state of affairs throughout the shattered fabric of what only an hour or so ago had been one of the finest cruisers in the British Navy. The aerial bombardment had taken her in all her weakest instead of her strongest portions, and the result had been, not a battle, but the merest massacre, culminating in the final tragedy of the explosion which had literally blown to pieces or otherwise killed every survivor of the unequal duel save themselves.

The flag was run up.

Added to this they found that the ship, in spite of the fact that all her watertight compartments had been closed before she went into action, was settling slowly but surely by the stern. Of the boats there was not one fit for use. Hanging in their exposed positions on the davits they had been riddled through and through by the storms of shot or burnt to uselessness by the fire-shells. The main gaff had been shot away, and this had brought the White Ensign down to the deck just before the explosion of the boilers, so when he had completed his inspection as far as he could make it, the Captain said:

"Well, if we have to go down we'll go with the old flag flying. Mr. Clinton, see if you can find anything in the bridge-house, and you, Mr. Thompson, go and see if the fore signal halyards are all right. I think they are."

The midshipmen found a Union Jack, and the halyards proved to be in working order, so the flag was run up to the fore and then the three went back to the bridge to wait for the end, and watch the beginning of the aerial duel which was now inevitable unless, as was very unlikely, the *Vengeur*, content with the destruction she had wrought, should decline the challenge of the enemy who had come to meet her in her own element.

Captain Maxwell had been right in his conjecture as to the character of the strange craft which had arrived on the scene of action a couple of hours too late to do anything towards preventing Renault and Hartog from accomplishing the terrible destruction and slaughter that they had achieved with such dreadful rapidity and thoroughness.

More than a year before Mr. Hiram Maxim, after many failures and one or two disasters, had succeeded in demonstrating the practicability of human flight by mechanical means. His æroplane was to all intents and purposes a huge kite with auxiliary wings, supporting a car in which an engine, driven by steam and burning vaporised gasoline fuel, operated two huge propellers projecting from the stern.

These forced the inclined æroplane and wings against the air, the upthrust of which lifted the machine from the ground after a short run corresponding to that of a bird taking flight from the earth. As soon as his machine had really flown and had proved itself capable of being steered and manœuvred in the air he had offered the exclusive rights of the invention to the British Government for a million sterling, an offer which it is almost unnecessary to state the British Government had declined, after wasting about six months in negotiations In the midst of these the Tsar of Russia had sent a commission of three officers to examine the flying machine, with power to conclude the bargain there and then if they were satisfied that it would do what its inventor claimed for it.

Even this failed to break the bonds of tradition and red tape which paralysed the British War Office; and the machine was only saved from becoming the property of the Tsar by the spirited and patriotic action of a hastily-formed syndicate composed of a dozen of the wealthiest peers and gentlemen in England, who in their first sitting guaranteed to pay the million down, and raise another half-million within six months for the purpose of building a small fleet of æroplanes on Mr. Maxim giving his undertaking not to sell his invention, or any part of it, to any foreign Power.

This ensured the refusal of the Tsar's offer, and raised such a storm of popular indignation against the authorities, as soon as the story was made public, that within a week the Royal Assent had been given to a Bill authorising the payment of half the money out of the public funds. This had happened a little less than six months before the *Vengeur* had made her appearance above the Atlantic.

As soon as the money had been guaranteed it had been decided to build six æroplanes under the supervision of the inventor, and of these the first to take the air equipped for fighting purposes was the *Britannia*, the craft which Captain Maxwell and his companions were now watching from the bridge of the disabled *Devon* as she came sailing down out of the northern sky to engage the foe whose terrible and swiftly succeeding exploits had already been flashed by telegraph over the whole of Europe and America.

She had, of course, been tested as regards her capabilities of bomb-dropping, and her inventor had mounted in her car three light, specially constructed machine-guns, two of the Maxim type forward, and amidships a gun capable of throwing a two-pound shell to a distance varying from two to five miles, according to the elevation. She had shown that she was capable of tremendous destruction on land or sea, but she had, of course, had no opportunity of proving her powers as a fighting ship when pitted against a craft which could dispute the mastery of her own element with her.

How she would actually acquit herself was now to be seen by the three silent watchers who, anxiously sweeping the sky with their glasses, stood on the half-wrecked bridge of the slowly-sinking *Devon* waiting for the first aerial duel in the history of the world to begin.

The *Britannia*, flying like a huge bird on extended and motionless wings, swooped gracefully down from her elevation of two thousand feet until within fifty feet she passed the floating

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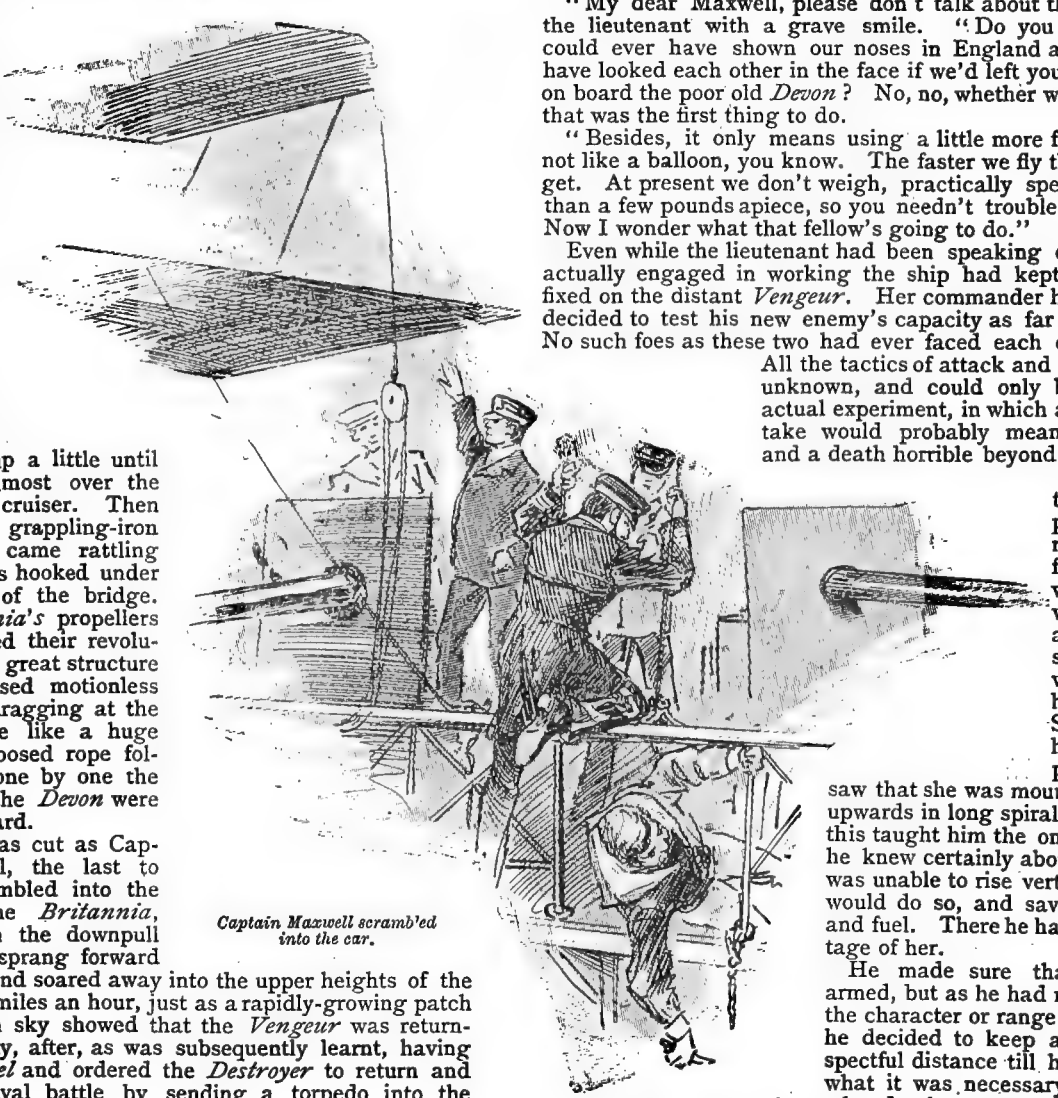
wreck of the *Devon* at a speed of about fifteen miles an hour. They saw that she carried a crew of six men, and that she was commanded by a man in the uniform of a lieutenant of the British Navy.

"Why, good heavens, Pelham, is that you!" exclaimed Captain Maxwell, as the first hails were exchanged, and he recognised in the naval officer a man who three years before had served under him as second lieutenant in the *Devon* when she was first commissioned.

"Yes, Captain Maxwell, it is," came the reply. "I'm deeply sorry to see what's happened to the poor old *Devon*, we'll try and send a line on board and take you off. She doesn't look as if she'll float much longer."

"No, she won't, I'm afraid. We've had an awful hammering from that blackguard, but you mustn't think of stopping to take us off. If he catches you down here he'll smash you to bits in no time."



Captain Maxwell scramb'ed into the car.

"We must risk that," replied Lieutenant Pelham decisively, as the aeroplane swung round and soared up a little until she hung almost over the foretop of the cruiser. Then a rope with a grappling-iron at the end came rattling down and was hooked under the ironwork of the bridge. The *Britannia's* propellers now quickened their revolutions, and the great structure remained poised motionless in the air, dragging at the tautened rope like a huge kite, till a noosed rope followed, and one by one the survivors of the *Devon* were hauled on board.

The rope was cut as Captain Maxwell, the last to ascend, scrambled into the car, and the *Britannia*, released from the downpull of the rope, sprang forward and upward and soared away into the upper heights of the air at eighty miles an hour, just as a rapidly-growing patch in the western sky showed that the *Vengeur* was returning to the fray, after, as was subsequently learnt, having sunk the *Ariel* and ordered the *Destroyer* to return and finish the naval battle by sending a torpedo into the crippled *Devon*.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FIRST AERIAL DUEL.

WHILE the *Vengeur* was coming up at a cautiously moderated speed of not more than thirty miles an hour, Captain Maxwell gave the commander of the *Britannia* a rapid but sufficient description of her appearance, armament, and approximate speed.

"H'm," said the lieutenant, looking rather serious, when he had finished his description. "A hundred miles an hour or over, you say. That's bad. Eighty is our best speed, and then you say he can soar vertically; we can only soar spirally. That's point number two against us.

"Now, I wonder how high the fellow can soar. A lot depends on that, for I can see perfectly well that in this warfare of the future for one air-ship to get above another will be something like a frigate, or a line-of-battle ship getting the weather-gauge of an enemy, only a good deal more so. Keep her up, Jackson, keep her up," he continued, turning to the man who was stationed at the levers which controlled the auxiliary side wings or lifting-planes. "Keep her up; we shall want all the elevation we can get."

"And by bringing us three on board, Pelham, you've diminished your rising power by putting between five and six hundred pounds more weight on board."

"My dear Maxwell, please don't talk about that," replied the lieutenant with a grave smile. "Do you suppose we could ever have shown our noses in England again or even have looked each other in the face if we'd left you to go down on board the poor old *Devon*? No, no, whether we win or not, that was the first thing to do.

"Besides, it only means using a little more fuel. This is not like a balloon, you know. The faster we fly the lighter we get. At present we don't weigh, practically speaking, more than a few pounds apiece, so you needn't trouble about that. Now I wonder what that fellow's going to do."

Even while the lieutenant had been speaking everyone not actually engaged in working the ship had kept his glasses fixed on the distant *Vengeur*. Her commander had evidently decided to test his new enemy's capacity as far as possible. No such foes as these two had ever faced each other before. All the tactics of attack and defence were unknown, and could only be learnt by actual experiment, in which a single mistake would probably mean destruction and a death horrible beyond description.

He saw that the æroplane could move very fast, but whether she was moving at her utmost speed or not was what he had to learn. So, too, with her soaring power. He saw that she was mounting rapidly upwards in long spiral curves, and this taught him the one thing that he knew certainly about her; she was unable to rise vertically or she would do so, and save both time and fuel. There he had the advantage of her.

He made sure that she was armed, but as he had no idea as to the character or range of her guns he decided to keep at a very respectful distance till he had learnt what it was necessary for him to know before the duel to the death actually commenced. If he had only carried a sufficient amount of ammunition it would have been easier for him to fight a fleet of sea-going ships and destroy them one by one as he had destroyed the British, French, and Portuguese cruisers and torpedo boats than it would be to fight this single opponent that had come to challenge the *Vengeur* in her own element. He determined, therefore, that the first trial of strength should be one of soaring power. It did not need a second glance to tell him that the æroplane was trying to gain the advantage in elevation and then open fire on him while he floated below.

"So we are going to have a flying match, are we, to begin with," he said to himself as he stood in his conning-tower,

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watching the *Britannia* sweeping round and round and climbing higher and higher into the bright blue sky with every curve she made.

"I wonder how the deuce the British Government got hold of that thing. Why, of course, what an ass I am! she's one of Maxim's æroplanes. The old boy must have made a success of it after all. Of course, there's only one man in England could build a thing like that, and he's an American. Well, well, M. Maxim, let us see if your pretty mechanical kite can fly as well as the *Vengeur*.

"Five thousand feet," he continued, glancing at the aneroid; "and that thing is about a thousand feet higher. I suppose he'll make his swoop soon. I think I'd better let him do it and force his hand. He can't ram me, that's quite certain. He'd smash that bit of a car to fragments if he tried; but if he gives me a chance to put the *Vengeur's* ram through that kite of his, I'll spoil his flying powers for a bit.

"Ah, yes, *sapristi!* that's a good idea. Why shouldn't I let her down gently and capture her? That would be a triumph and a half—besides, she might be useful. Anyhow, she'd make a pretty plaything for the boys to practise aerial navigation in. Taxil, come into the conning-tower for a moment, will you?"

His lieutenant promptly obeyed the order given through the speaking-tube that communicated with the engine-room, in addition to the electric signals. He pointed the *Britannia* out to him, and said:

"Look you, mon gare'."

"Look you, *mon garc'*, there is our new enemy. You observe, she's an æroplane. That means she can't soar vertically, but only spirally, as she is doing now. There we have the advantage of her. Also, I think she's flying her fastest, and that is not our fastest."

"*Tonnerre, mon capitaine!*" replied Taxil, with a shrug of his shoulders. "Not by a good thirty or forty miles an hour at the least. We can sail round her and over her. Bah, what's the good of sending out a kite to fight an air-ship! Will you destroy her, M. Max, or will you just capture her and make a despatch boat of her?"

"Just what I was thinking, *mon brave*," replied Max, putting his hand on his lieutenant's shoulder; "but first we must have a little flying match, and then we shall see what we shall see. Now, are all your engines and gearing in proper order?"

"They are perfect," said Taxil, with a touch of pride in his tone, for he had already begun to love the marvellous machinery that had been under his control during the eventful morning. "Ask me for a hundred and thirty miles an hour and you shall have it. The engines have never been tried to their fullest capacity yet."

"Good!" said Max. "I don't believe they have, but they will be this morning. Now, look you, that thing, whatever they call her, is seeing if she can out-soar us. When she thinks she has done so she'll make a swoop for us, and either try and drop a bomb on us, or cripple us with bullets. Perhaps, who knows, she may have a shell-gun or two on board, and if she crippled one of our wings, or got a shell into your engine-room, the cruise of the *Vengeur* would end with a single ignominious plunge down yonder. Do you see?"

As Max spoke he made a downward gesture with his thumb towards the vast expanse of ocean that now lay spread out five thousand feet and more beneath them. Taxil shrugged his shoulders again, and said:

"That would be a poor anti-climax to our morning's victory. It must not happen."

"No," said Max. "And it shall not if the *Vengeur* does what I expect her to do. Now listen. We have too much weight on. Go and take that Nordenfeldt to pieces and pitch it into the sea. I don't think we shall want to do any shooting, and if we do the Maxims will be enough. Move one of those aft and put it in the Nordenfeldt's place.

"Then you will have two more men to spare. Take one of them with you into the engine-room. I think you'll find Lacroix the smartest, and let him stand by to give you a hand to the engine, because everything will depend upon the rapidity with which my orders are executed. Set the other one to get out the longest piece of that fine wire rope that we have on board. I want fifty or sixty fathoms of it at least, and set him to work to splice one of those four-pronged grapnels on toit

"Then let him make fast the end round the after-part of the ship—right round the hull, mind—he can do it by working through the slides and windows, and have it so that the after-mast will stop it slipping off if a strain comes on it. Then when he's got it all clear, let him have the rope coiled so that he can drop the gapnel clear of the ship in an instant. That's all at present. Now be off, and let's have everything done smartly on the word, and you shall see something before you're an hour or two older."

Taxil promised prompt obedience, and left the conning-tower. Max resumed his watch on the æroplane, keeping the *Vengeur* still ascending almost vertically at a leisurely speed, and always maintaining his distance of about five miles from the *Britannia*.

For nearly an hour nothing happened. The two air-ships, like wary opponents testing each other's strength and watching narrowly for the first opportunity of advantage, kept soaring steadily up and up into the higher regions of the atmosphere until the fans of the *Britannia* were beating the rarefied air at a height of nearly ten thousand feet.

The *Vengeur*, as nearly as Lieutenant Pelham could guess, was still five miles away and some two thousand feet lower. He found, as he had expected to do, that the higher the *Britannia* rose the less actual elevation she gained in proportion to the power exerted by her engines. This was of course due to the decreased suspensory power of the rarefied air.

"I don't think we can get higher," he said at length to Captain Maxwell. "And it doesn't look as if he could either, but still we mustn't be too sure. Now I'll go to the helm and try and bear down on him. You stop here and do all the seeing you can, for no one else ever saw a fight like this is going to be. Stand by the guns there! Keep them trained on him as well as you can, and fire sharply when I give the word."

The *Britannia* now took one last upward curve, the engines were slowed down, and she shot away with ever-increasing momentum towards her enemy on a very slightly inclined plane. Just as he saw her coming Renault received word from Taxil that his orders had been executed and everything was ready.

"All right," he said, "then down fans and full speed ahead! Give her every yard you can!"

Taxil returned to the engine-room, and the next moment the suspensory fans collapsed, the three propellers whirled round with ever-increasing speed, and Max heard the wind whistling and screaming past the masts and stays as he swung the *Vengeur* out of the path of the rapidly approaching *Britannia*, and darted away to the southward at a speed that both astounded and disgusted Lieutenant Pelham and his shipmates.

It was absurd to think of using the guns at the terrific speed at which both ships were moving. Firing into space from the top of an express train would have been a work almost of

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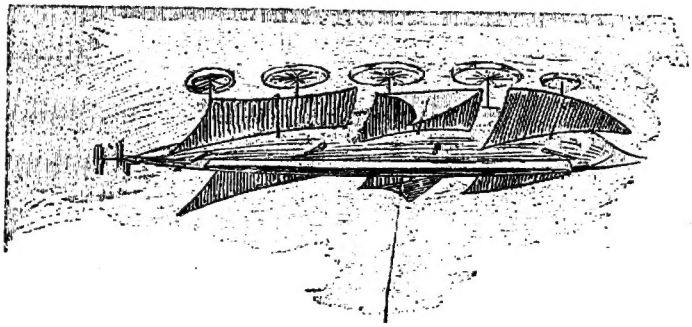
precision in comparison with it. The battle of tactics was not over yet; in fact, it was only just beginning.

Lieutenant Pelham inclined his guiding-planes to the full again, and the *Britannia*, under the influence of her own momentum, swept nearly a thousand feet higher. Then the engines began to work at full speed again, and they looked round for their enemy.



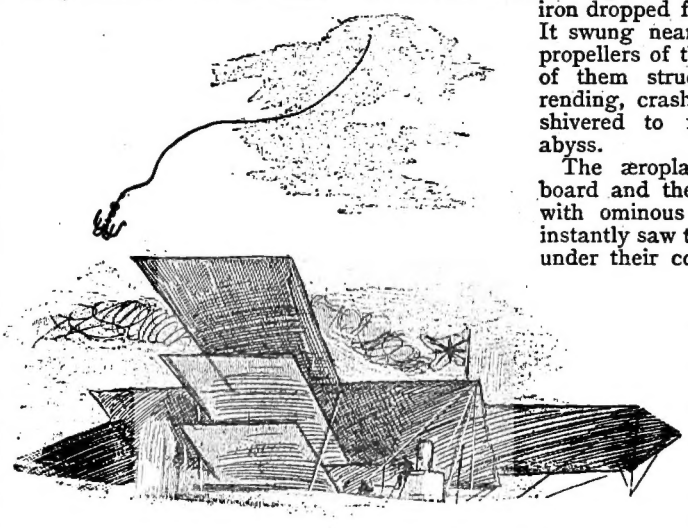
They had not long to wait. Cleaving the air like an arrow in its upward flight, the *Vengeur* seemed to leap up out of the distance to the south at right angles to their course. She passed them like a flash of light a couple of miles astern and five hundred feet or so above them.

"He's got the elevation of us, after all!" gasped Pelham, half choked by the rush of the wind through which they were flying. "And, as for speed, I believe the brute could fly round us."

"Yes, I'm afraid there's no doubt about that," said Captain Maxwell, biting an excusable imprecation in half between his suddenly clenched teeth. "I wonder how, in the name of all that is unfortunate, it came about that such a magnificent fighting engine as that, ever fell into the hands of such pitiless scoundrels as those infernal Anarchists."

"I suppose we shall learn that sometime—if the said scoundrels let us live to know anything more," replied the Lieutenant gloomily.

The *Vengeur* sped away to the northward, swerved round again, and, ever mounting up and up, swept round ahead, doubled again, and with a last sudden turn placed herself over the *Britannia*, whose aneroid now marked an elevation of ten thousand four hundred feet.



Instinctively all on board her felt that the end was coming, and that the battle had been won and lost without a single shot having been fired. For a moment they looked at each other in blank dismay, and then at the awful void below and around them into which a single shell dropped from the *Vengeur* would now hurl them together with the fragments of the wonderful machine that bore them upon its wings. Their own æroplanes prevented them seeing their antagonist from the car, and, therefore, also made it impossible to fire at him without piercing their own support. It was as complete a case of checkmate as had ever occurred in the game of war.

Then, while they were waiting with bated breath for the blow that would mean destruction, something dropped from the sky and struck the *Britannia's* forward guiding-plane. They looked up at the sound and saw that it was a four-pronged grappling iron. After striking the wing it swung out and then back again, then two of the prongs hooked themselves firmly in the framework, and then the rope tautened.

There was a ripping, tearing sound, the *Britannia* gave a lurch to aft, and then the hinge and stays of the wing gave way and it was wrenched bodily off. Like a bird with a wounded wing the *Britannia* wavered in her course and the barometer showed that she was slowly sinking. The detached wing was hauled up out of sight, then the grappling iron descended again, this time astern, and within a couple of minutes the lifting wing was also wrenched off. Evidently it was the intention of those on board the *Vengeur* to cripple, and not to destroy, the æroplane.

Her crew waited in helpless rage and agonising anxiety to see what would happen next. Once more the grappling-iron dropped from the sky; this time astern. It swung nearer and nearer to the whirling propellers of the *Britannia*, and at last one of them struck it. Then there came a rending, crashing sound, and the propeller, shivered to fragments, dropped into the abyss.

The æroplane swerved violently to starboard and then began to oscillate laterally with ominous rapidity. Those in the car instantly saw that the machine was no longer under their control, and that the only thing to do was to lighten its load as much as possible, and then, if their now victorious adversary allowed them, to trust to the æroplanes to save them from the awful fall that now looked as if it could not but be inevitable.

"Quick, for God's sake," cried Pelham. "Overboard with the guns, we can't use them now! Overboard with everything that we can spare. Look lively! She'll go down now like a kite with a broken string!"

(To be continued.)

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The Artist's Love-Dream.

EDWARD LUZERNIER enjoyed what is called a "successful artistic career." He was an artist, and studied at Rome, and on his return to Paris, being convinced that classical subjects are played out, and his genius not inclining to landscapes, patriotic celebrations, or nymphs in sunlight, he had decided to devote himself to portrait painting.

Having but few relations, he victimised his comrades, and for several years exhibited portraits of well-known artists and sculptors in every conceivable attitude. However, one day he was commissioned to paint a picture of an ancient duchess in a wonderful toilet of velvet and pearls, with a hound at her feet and a coat of arms in the background, and this was his starting-point.

Very soon after elegant ladies and famous men felt the necessity of bequeathing to posterity their physiognomy under the signature of Edward Luzernier, and for the artist this meant both success and fortune.

He bought old furniture, rare china, and antique weapons, and refurnished in a sumptuously artistic manner, held receptions in his studio, and, in fact, became quite a lion.

Personally, he was brisk, energetic, and genial, and won the heart of his companions by his kindheartedness and generosity; and yet Edward Luzernier was not happy. No, in the midst of a life of apparently unalloyed success one thing was wanting, and that void cast a gloom over his greatest triumphs—the artist wanted love; without love he felt his work was vain, and his honours but as Dead Sea fruit.

The young man was certainly not prepossessing; he was short, square, and bony, and the most anxious care had been powerless to reduce his hair and beard to order, while his hands were very clumsy; as to his face, it was large and round, with just the tender, courageous expression of a big dog.

All the ladies called him "Mon bon Luzernier," in a tone of sympathetic protection, and in such a way as to invariably dash his hopes to the ground. Often and often had he been on the point of throwing himself at the feet of one of the beauties who frequented his studio, but until now he had restrained himself in time, realising how vain his dreams were.

One summer evening, when he was in his dressing-room (a very elegant apartment, which had cost him a portrait and a half), Luzernier felt even more lonely than usual. He strolled out on the balcony, and gazed idly at the swallows flying backwards and forwards. All day he had been at work on the portrait of a great politician, and in half an hour was due at a dinner-party, where he would be presented to an Italian marchioness, who also desired to sit to him; and she, too, would do as the others did—call him "Mon bon Luzernier." "It will always be so," he sighed. The swallows were still winging their noisy flight, and he was just about to re-enter, when, on the other side of the road, leaning on the balcony exactly facing his, he saw a woman looking intently at him.

She was tall, with jet black hair and small regular features and a daintily-fresh complexion, the *tout ensemble* being indescribably charming. Luzernier's heart beat fast, and in the regard which he returned to the young lady he tried to put all he knew of emotion and ardour. Was he dreaming? Could he see clearly? She smiled a little, a sweet, reassuring smile. For a few moments they remained thus, then she slowly withdrew. The painter waited for her to return, but she did not appear, and he arrived very late at the dinner-party.

. . . . . .

Next day he heard all about this lady of the balcony. She was English, a widow, and very rich; staying in Paris with her mother.

Twenty times during a sitting Luzernier escaped from his studio to see if she were at the window; but it rained, and he saw her no more. A few days later, however, to his delight, she read the whole morning in the balcony, and Luzernier told himself he had been wrong in always working in his studio, and that fresh air would do him good.

How exquisite that pale pink dress was. What lovely black hair. She had looked again and smiled. The artist adjourned all further sittings for portraits, and his time was passed at the window. Once he bowed to her, and she returned his salutation; she always smiled in that singular way, and Luzernier fell more and more deeply in love with her.

He thought of writing to her; but what should he say? If he offended her his heart would break—he preferred to live on in sweet uncertainty, and hoped for a chance meeting, though he trembled to spoil his dream.

The studio teemed with studies of the fair unknown; he lived among these heads in profile, heads looking up, heads looking down. His sadness was turned to joy—at last he was beloved—and he was in a paradise. At times, however, there was a sort of hesitation in the expression of the beautiful English lady.

Luzernier noticed it, and assured himself that his fervent love had touched her—she had guessed how he worshipped her, and was not displeased.

One September afternoon he saw the windows opposite were all open, and the servants came and went rapidly. "What could have happened? Could she be ill?" he said to himself. But, no; she appears on the balcony dressed as if to go out. She leant her two daintily covered gloved hands on the iron balustrade, and seemed serious and perplexed. As usual, the painter saluted her. Then, as if deciding all at once, she pointed to the street with an imperious gesture, and entered quickly. She wished him to descend. She was going to speak to him.

Luzernier seized his hat and gloves, and only waited to choose his best cane—a present from an Austrian Princess to "Mon bon Luzernier." The lady came out of her house and, the painter advanced shyly. What attitude should he take? Should he advance? No, she comes to him with a slightly embarrassed air. How much lovelier she is seen in the light of day, and so near.

"Monsieur," she began.

He interrupted. "Madame, my emotion is so great—what gratitude—having so kindly—I should so like——" then finding that none of his phrases would finish, he was silent, discouraged; but so happy!

The young lady continued, with a pretty foreign accent, "I know that what I am doing is strange, and I have hesitated about it for a long time. Perhaps you will think it rude of me to meddle."

"Oh——"

"I should never have decided to act thus, but you are a famous artist. I admire your talent. Often have I wished to tell you across the street, when we were in the balcony, but I dared not. Now I must speak, as I am leaving Europe. Mon Dieu! how late I am; there is the carriage! This is what I want to tell you. From the window of my room, which is opposite your dressing-room, nearly every day for the past three months I have seen your valet brushing his boots with your hair-brush! Horrible, isn't it? Good-bye, monsieur!"

Edward Luzernier does not believe in the meaning smiles of young women who dream in balconies on summer evenings now, and he is still a bachelor.

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